

CONTINUING ABSTRACTION IN AMERICAN ART

Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. "Stop!" cried the groaning old man at last. "Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree."

Gertrude Stein
Making of Americans, 1932

From the mid-1950s the dominant mode in American art has been abstraction. Abstract artists evolved during this time into two major groups: gestural painters, who attempted to charge each brushstroke with personal, emotional content, and color-field painters, who covered large canvases with areas of color. With the gestural painters the content was autobiographical whereas the color-field painters sought to embody the sublime in their work. Barnett Newman, a color-field painter, argued in 1949 for "pure painting" meaning "the elimination of subject matter" and a recognition that "color, line, shape and space are the tools whereby thought is made articulate."

As the 1960s began, the influence of the gestural painters waned. The anxiety and emotionalism of the art of the 1950s gave way to a more rigorous, more strictly intellectual art, one whose visual forms tend to be starker and less derived from nature. This firming of form, this hardening of edges and radical reduction of content most often meant that color was elevated to be a major communicative vehicle.

"It must be remembered that a picture before it is a picture of a war-horse, nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a plane surface covered by colors arranged in a certain order," wrote the French artist Maurice Denis in 1890. The color-covered flat surface of a painting has two dimensions, height and width. And since the early years of this century, abstract painters have abandoned the devices of perspective to create the illusion of depth. The painted canvas need no longer be a "window on the world."

The painters in this exhibition, most of whom began their careers in the 1960s, have chosen to work with the issues that came to the fore in the abstract art of that decade. In the work of the younger artists, size is often smaller, scale is one of diminished vastness, largely because the implied or explicit grid of many of the paintings contains and limits space. Color, if a communicative vehicle, is now restrained or neutralized. The paint surface is consciously constructed: the painters in this exhibition have applied pigment by a variety of means: squeegee, brushes of cotton swabs, basters, fingernails, crayons and garden rakes. Gesture, mooted by years of color-field concerns, may be reappearing as humanist geometry.

These paintings, like all art, offer information about human experience.

It has always seemed to be a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realize our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete.

Gertrude Stein
Making of Americans

CATALOGUE

WMAA denotes works from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Height precedes width. Measurements are in inches.

Edward Avedesian

UNTITLED 1965

Acrylic on canvas 102 × 68

WMAA; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Schwartz

Walter Darby Bannard

FLOAT AND PAUSE 1 1969

Oil on canvas 66 × 99

WMAA; Anonymous gift

Jake Berthot

HARD GREEN 1969

Synthetic polymer on canvas 56 × 97½

WMAA; Gift of the Larry Aldrich Foundation

Alan Cote

REDRUTH 1969

Synthetic polymer on canvas 92 × 133

WMAA; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Bocour and purchase

David Diao

UNTITLED 1969

Synthetic polymer on canvas 87 × 157½

WMAA; Anonymous gift

Harriet Korman

UNTITLED 1973-74

Crayon and acrylic on canvas 60 × 84

Lent by the artist

Margia Kramer

UNTITLED 1974

Oil and acrylic on canvas 87 × 78

Lent by the artist

Peter Plagens

UNTITLED 1973

Oil, crayon, gouache, and pastel on paper 29 × 41

Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

Robert Mangold

DISTORTED CIRCLE 1972

Acrylic on canvas 60 × 60

Collection Donna Schneier, New York

Brice Marden

SEA PAINTING 1 1973-74

Oil and wax on canvas 72 × 54

Courtesy Parasol Press, Ltd., New York

Elizabeth Murray

FIVE TRIANGLES 1972

Oil on canvas 12 × 16

Lent by the artist

Dona Nelson

BOAT 1974

Oil on canvas 81 × 78

Lent by the artist

David Novros

no title 1973

Oil on canvas 108 × 132

Courtesy Bykert Gallery Downtown, New York

Garry Rich

SIDE-BURST 1974

Acrylic on canvas 84 × 120

Lent by the artist

Herbert Schiffrin

CANAL 7 (CUPID'S LOUNGE) 1970

Synthetic polymer on canvas 94½ × 108¼

WMAA; Gift of the Larry Aldrich Foundation

Jenny Snider

SMALL PAINTING 1971

Oil on canvas 18 × 24

WMAA; Gift of Charles and Anita Blatt

Joan Snyder

DEAR GARY 1974

Oil on canvas 18 × 18

Lent by the artist

Robert Zakanych

UNTITLED 1974

Acrylic on canvas 60 × 66

Courtesy Cuninghame Ward Gallery, New York

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September 19 – November 1, 1974

This exhibition has been organized by Richard Armstrong, Richard Marshall, and William Zimmer, participants in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program.

The Downtown Branch Museum is operated under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. The administrative coordinator is Toba Tucker. The staff consists of participants in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program earning advanced university credit while engaged in full-time research and museum work. The Helena Rubinstein Fellows are: Catherine Coleman, Hofstra University; Ruth Cummings, Boston University; Hillary Johnson, Cornell University; Janet Kardon, University of Pennsylvania; Linda Kent, Goddard College; Robert Lamb, City University of New York; Michael J. Leja, Swarthmore College; Abigail Turner, Sarah Lawrence College; Faythe M. Weaver, Ohio State University; Charles Wright, Princeton University.

The Downtown Whitney, located in the Uris Building at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of lower Manhattan. The Museum is open Monday through Friday, 11 to 3. Admission is free.

**DOWNTOWN BRANCH
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**

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New York, New York 10041